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SUBSTANTIVE THEME: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR DEVELOPMENT

DRAFT REPORT

Rapporteur Ms. Marina RANGA (Romania)

Chapter ...

Chairman's Summary of the discussion

1. The Working Group on Information and Communication Technologies for Development, in its report and recommendations, had focused on the problems of access to and the impacts of these technologies in developing countries and countries in transition. The work of the Working Group had led to the preparation, in addition to its report, of two background documents. The first dealt with scenarios for the development and impact of ICTs on developing countries and countries in transition, and the second was an extensive and in-depth analysis of the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in building innovative knowledge societies; the latter report could serve as a source book for, among others, the national task forces which were recommended by the Working Group.

2. Having considered the arguments and evidence on the pattern of diffusion of ICTs and their impacts on countries, the Working Group had arrived at three basic working assumptions which underlined its recommendations to the Commission. They were that: (1) the potential of ICTs far exceeded their impacts so far, and although, in the short run, the cost of joining the global information infrastructure (GII) might be high, in the long run the cost of not joining was likely to be even higher. There was therefore no alternative for developing countries but to gain access to these technologies and join the emerging GII; (2) there was a need for the active involvement of the private sector in the diffusion of ICTs in developing countries and countries in transition, although in countries where the private sector was still at its early stage of development, public/private sector partnerships might be necessary to prompt access to and effective application of ICTs; and (3) developing countries and countries in transition were at very different starting positions in developing their respective national information infrastructures (NII).

3. The Working Group had proposed four key recommendations and guidelines for developing countries and countries in transition with regard to developing and strengthening their national ICT strategies. These were that: (1) each developing country and country in transition should establish a national ICT strategy, and where such strategies already existed, they should be reviewed to ensure that they took note of the guidelines proposed by the Working Group; (2) action should be taken by national Governments to establish a task force or commission or to ensure that an existing entity was charged with establishing the guidelines for their national ICT strategies; (3) each body of the United Nations system should review the financing, production and use of ICTs for social and economic development in its area of responsibility; and (4) UNCTAD should prepare a study for the next session of the Commission on the implications of new forms of revenue generation, focusing especially on those involving ICTs which might support social and economic development objectives.

4. It was stressed by some members that, while the recommendations and guidelines were pertinent, they lacked the focus and specificity necessary for effective implementation. Some developing countries, in particular the least developed countries, might lack the resources, both financial and technical, to implement effectively the guidelines and recommendations proposed without concerted support from the international community. The financing aspects of

entry into the GII by developing countries and countries in transition should be given serious consideration. In responding to this comment, one member reported that the Commission was preparing three studies on coalition of resources with a focus on ICTs, specifically the financing of the applications of ICTs in three areas, namely transmission infrastructure, education and health. The reports would be finalized and distributed in due course.

5. Several members emphasized the need to consider carefully the wider dissemination of the work of the Working Group and the Commission as a whole. One possible channel for disseminating the findings, conclusions and recommendations of the Working Group was via the Internet website. However, since access to the Internet was limited in most developing counties, other more traditional methods of dissemination should be pursued.

6. While the "window of opportunity" opened by the new ICTs was widely acknowledged, the challenges faced by developing countries and countries in transition were numerous, and coping with them would require concerted efforts at the national and international levels. The Working Group had concluded that, to make the most of the opportunities offered, countries needed to develop a national ICT strategy and build local skills, a technological capability and an organizational and institutional capacity. This would require a technology assessment in each country in order to determine its starting position and ICT needs.